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Muscular Foe

Warsaw Pact Forces Always Take Offensive In Invasion Rehearsals

But Defectors Say Soviets Fret Over Troop Morale, Role of East Europeans

'Eight-Foot Gorilla' or Not?

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EAST BERLIN—If practice makes perfect, the Warsaw Pact must be nearly flawless.

Forty years after Western forces invaded Normandy, the Soviets regularly rehearse attacks from the East of similar magnitude. At least four major maneuvers and many smaller ones each year—three times the practice Western foes get—exercise everyone from nuclear button pushers to kitchen staff, until wartime reactions become reflex.

"The first strike always began from our side," recalls Karl-Heinz Rutsch, a former East German intelligence lieutenant bought out of political prison last year by the West German government. "We are told that is because through our superior intelligence gathering we are able to read the enemy's intentions and attack before he can."

The alarmingly frequent, offensively oriented dress rehearsals seem to bolster the Pentagon's portrayal of the Warsaw Pact as an awesome, expansionist fighting machine whose well-oiled cogs move relentlessly toward world domination. However, former Warsaw Pact officers and soldiers now in the West see the maneuvers and other Soviet military actions as the exertions of an indeed potent but flawed adversary prompted as much by fears and weaknesses as by international ambitions.

Reasons for Practice

"Their major concern is will the system work in the crunch," says John Erickson of Scotland's University of Edinburgh, an authority on the Soviet military. "They exercise the system so much, not because they are planning a nuclear war tomorrow, but because they want to keep the system running."

However, there are built-in restraints on any Soviet notions of using military power in Western Europe despite superior numbers of forces. The Warsaw Pact structure's first priority remains political domination of Eastern Europe, for which it has been brutally used. The pact's military has been used only once since World War II as an expansionist tool outside of the Soviet bloc, in Afghanistan, and there absolute victory has eluded it for 4½ years.

"If the Soviet Union can't subdue Afghanistan, it certainly can't think that it can sit on the aspirations of 250 million Europeans," says Col. Jonathan Alford of the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London.

Former Warsaw Pact soldiers and officers also cite human failings and demographic changes that must worry Soviet commanders. They list discipline and morale problems, particularly in Afghanistan. They speak of ethnic concerns growing out of a shrinking Russian and growing Moslem population, which thus has been trusted with few combat responsibilities. Economically, the Soviet Union must worry about devoting a large proportion of its gross national product, which is only half that of the U.S., to protect itself from threats ranging from China to the U.S. and to match costly Western military technological advances.

A Large Gorilla

North Atlantic Treaty Organization officials in Brussels concede that the U.S. exaggerates Soviet military strength and plays down the country's weaknesses so as to gain more backing for defense budgets and military buildups. They nonetheless argue that there is no reason to be less vigilant. "We perhaps make the Russians out to be better than they are," concedes a senior analyst at NATO. "But if you are put in a cage with an eight-foot gorilla, you respect him no matter what you think his problems might be."

Perhaps the key factor in measuring Warsaw Pact capabilities is the reliability or, for that matter, importance of Eastern Europe's armies in a Soviet offensive. The most frequent comment is that they are indeed vital but probably reliable only if Soviet commanders use them in limited but crucial support roles in a quickly executed invasion portrayed as a defensive action.

Most Warsaw Pact attack scenarios involve 58 Warsaw Pact divisions, of which 31 would be non-Soviet, says A. Ross Johnson, a senior researcher at the Rand Corporation.

He, like most Western analysts, figures the Warsaw Pact would want to invade deeply in a blitzkrieg to preempt a Western conventional or nuclear counteroffensive. The Soviets acting alone couldn't do this without their troop movements alerting the West. "Without the East Europeans, the whole idea of a massive surprise attack just doesn't hold up," Mr. Johnson says.

Mr. Rutsch, the former East German intelligence lieutenant, offers some insight into how it might work. Soviet and East German troops always were portrayed as being on the offensive during his officers' tactical training exercises and later on maneuvers, he says. Defense was rehearsed only as an interim phase before the next offensive.

East German officers constantly have drilled into them that "the enemy is to be destroyed on his own territory," he says. They are prepared to kill fellow Germans by indoctrination sessions in which the West German military is painted as an evil force built and run by former Nazis. If they don't believe that, another motivation is that their military record will determine whether they find future jobs and whether their children get good schooling.

In wartime, Soviet officers are always in command from division level on up. East Germans are told that the first-strike strategy is born out of the Soviets' desire to avoid a repetition of World War II, when they lost 20 million people and 7,000 towns and villages because Hitler caught them unprepared and hit first.

Mr. Rutsch recalls that in one exercise, East Germany's fifth artillery group provided key support for the Soviet Union's 12th shock army based in Rostock, hypothetically cutting off and occupying the northernmost West German state of Schleswig-Holstein and taking the coastline to prevent a sea landing. When asked what would happen to Hamburg, West Germany's largest city, a senior officer explained only, "Soviet troops will take care of that."

During other maneuvers, Mr. Rutsch witnessed Warsaw Pact troops theoretically taking West Germany, then marching on to the Atlantic in the area of the French-Belgian border within seven days. But only Soviet troop movements were mentioned after the fourth day. Mr. Rutsch assumes that is because East German troops would have suffered so many casualties, but other Western experts guess that the Soviet Union counts on East German reliability only in the initial phases of fighting, after which Soviet reinforcements arrive.



This article and another on page 30 begin a two-day special report on NATO and the Warsaw Pact.

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